CHAPTER III

The Great Depression

Q: The first thing that comes to mind with your association with the Works Progress Administration is the name of Hugh Johnson. Do you want to talk about your association with him, if any?

A: Yes, I'd be very glad to. During preceding years, the four years (1931-35) that I was with the National Guard, I think I mentioned that I contributed as much time as I could to the Professional Engineers Committee on Unemployment in New York City. This then involved 8,000 men, all graduate engineers, and all hit very hard by the depression; in fact, there was no work for them to do. Through the four founder engineering societies -- civil, mechanical, electrical, and mining and metallurgical, as they were known then -- a very considerable amount of money was raised each year from large engineering firms and other large donors to try to ease the problem for unemployed engineers in New York City. I had walked into this when looking around to see if there was something else I could do because the daytime wasn't always too busy in the Guard. I soon found myself habitually engaged in interviewing these people and in making certain investigations to help them with either outright grants of money, small checks, maybe $25.00, or a ton of coal here, or food orders there. In those days (1932-35) we were just feeling our way in what to do about our relief problem.

By 1934, I had been requested full time on this work to take over as secretary in charge, but, as I think we mentioned before, I was in the middle of trying to do a Command and General Staff extension course. It was to be my last year with the Guard, and I wanted to clean it up and do it, so that's what I did. In any event, the next summer Roosevelt decided that he was going to establish a nationwide WPA, and the Works Progress Administration, which was WPA, was based on the idea of at least 70% of the funds being expended on labor and not more than 30% of the funds being expended for supplies or hardware. He appointed Harry Hopkins in charge, with General Johnson switching over from the NRA to take charge of New York City, a tinderbox. General Johnson took charge on August 1, 1935. He inherited what was being done under the State Relief, which was called the TERA, Temporary Emergency Relief Administration. I arrived for duty

with him that day. He borrowed five officers from the Army Engineers, and then it occurred to somebody down in Washington that while these five had been sent up there cold, I was actually on the site and had been doing the work for four years. This was just an afterthought on somebody's part, so they asked General Johnson if he wanted my services, which he did, so I reported on the day he took over, August 1, 1935.

On the day I was put in charge of personnel we took over 75,000 people on the payroll from the state, and then the orders were that we employ 5,000 men a day until we reached a total of 225,000, which was quite a program. There weren't enough shovels and picks or anything else in New York City to do it, to say nothing about plans or programs existing to really put men to work. We had quite a problem. I remember about two weeks after we'd started that there was still insufficient work for them to do and that General Johnson received a check from Hopkins for $1.3 million. We then had 130,000 people on the payroll, and while they hadn't really been put to work, each one of them was handed a check that week for $10 as a little relief at the time. It didn't go far then, but think of where it wouldn't go now; it wouldn't do anything today. In any event, we pushed a lot of programs quickly through Mr. Hopkins down in Washington, and things did begin to move. We concentrated on the schools to a large extent because they were still in recess and some few projects had been prepared by the city before to try and get the money from the state, before the federals took over, so at least we were able to get into the schools. Schools were going to open in the middle of September, and because there was a dearth of approved projects for other departments in the city, most of the early people were put to work in the schools.

One of the amusing events was when the press got after the administrator, General Johnson. They said that he wasn't doing anything except in schools and there were too many people employed there. Well, we knew that, but we didn't have approved programs, so we didn't have the materials, we didn't have the equipment, we didn't have the organization set up to get into the many other city departments like Sanitation, Yards and Docks, and departments like that, so they had to be put in the schools if you were going to keep them busy at all.

I remember the press got after him one morning and he called me and he said, "Art, we're getting a complaint here, we've got too many people in the schools. Why is it?" I said, "Simply because the projects haven't been approved in Washington so that we can get them organized, assemble the equipment and supplies, and put them to work on the sewers or yards and docks or in other departments of the city government." He said, "Well, how many have we got?" It was a big number, so I said, "General, frankly we've got so many that we can't let the kids out for recess," whereupon the press and staff seemed to get a big kick out of that, and they eased up on the problem a little bit. But it was true, as a matter of fact; we had painters who were painting the inside of fences while painters were painting the outside of fences, and they had to be careful that they weren't painting each other as they passed, but this improved by fall. I will never put it up as a model of efficiency; it couldn't be. We didn't have the skills. We were fairly successful in getting such skills as we had in the right places. We were also fortunate in being able to hire a lot of men who had been in supervisory positions and who were either out of work or doing practically nothing. Furthermore, we had immediate call on some of the 8,000 engineers whom I knew a lot about because I had been working with them for the last four years. Many of them went back to fairly responsible positions at relatively modest pay, but not strictly relief pay. You still had to build incentive for them to do a top job. A lot of good work was done in those years. Every time I go to La Guardia Airport today, I get great satisfaction. La Guardia was one of our first projects, and we built La Guardia Field from the waste that the city had been piling for over a hundred years on Rikers Island, which was an obnoxious dump across the waterway from La Guardia Field. As a matter of fact, we had to build a bridge and then we started hauling all of this junk and refuse collected for over a century as fill for the area that is La Guardia Airport today.

North Beach Airport was also one of the projects. Six hundred other airports were built by the WPA in the country, a half million miles of roads, a hundred thousand bridges and viaducts. It is very interesting to note what was accomplished.

We removed, during one year, what New York City had set up as a 35-year program for removing streetcar tracks, replaced by buses. We had certain limitations

such as not working at night because of noise. We used jackhammers to tear up streetcar tracks; it's a little noisy, but there was a lot of work done. Old Fort Schuyler, which is the New York Merchant Marine Academy today, was rebuilt as a WPA project at that time. I moved to Chief Engineer from Director of Personnel and Director of the Five Borough Division, which had to do with the five boroughs. Later I was a special assistant to the administrator and tried to resolve some special difficulties there.

In the Five Borough Division we handled all citywide projects, such as the departments of Yards and Docks, Sanitation, and Education. Other projects were geared to borough budgets. In the smallest of New York City's five boroughs in population and probably the largest in size we built the Staten Island boardwalk. We built new harbors at Sheep's Head Bay; we paved Queens Boulevard. There was almost nothing that you could think of that we didn't do.

Another project was the New York City County Courthouse. That was a program that I acquired for some reason or other. It came under the Art Division. We had about 25,000 people who were doing work on the social side, social services and the arts rather than engineering. One of the most remarkable pieces of art is in the rotunda of the New York County Courthouse today. This was a program for which Tammany Hall, through the city administration at one time, had sought approval for $250,000. It was turned down because somebody didn't think that they asked for enough, saying it was $400,000. It was actually performed with relief labor, but with well-qualified supervision, for something over $100,000 under the WPA. We did many things that were reasonably efficient.

In October of 1935, General Johnson departed and Victor Ridder came in as Administrator. This was like the change between night and day, between a man like Johnson who was direct and fast-moving and a quiet gentleman like Victor Ridder. General Johnson certainly was a man who could get things started. It was usually desirable to have someone come along later and clean up the job, pick up the pieces, because a lot of things fell by the wayside, but I'm not degrading him at all because he was a man to get things done, and to get things started from point zero it frequently takes a man of that type. When General Johnson left, however, they picked out Victor Ridder,

who was a very respected man, probably a second- or third-generation American, a journalist, a man of culture, a man who then was suffering from some kind of an ailment as his left arm was always swollen to three times its normal size. He sat at his desk in his office when he was there for any period of time with a hook in a band that came from the ceiling in which he could lock his wrist and hold his arm up. I knew this man for 30 years and while he got more crippled and ended up moving in a chair, he persevered. He was a tremendous character. He was a strong man; nothing ever frustrated him, nothing ever excited him. He didn't respond like General Johnson did, for instance, by escalation of his voice or his physical motions. He was always, we knew, in considerable pain. I enjoyed the satisfaction of knowing him over his lifetime, and I lunched with him as late as 1965 or 1966 and he was still the same fine courageous character. I'm sure that he lived the good part of his life in considerable pain, so this was a different-type man to work with, very much different but very satisfying. Mr. Victor Ridder made a lasting impression on me. Of course I also observed General Johnson closely and he had many characteristics that I definitely admired. What one tries to do is to observe what is best about various people. Here were two very different men, but each of them had a great influence on me.

During this period, Robert Moses was really moving in New York. He was another very dynamic man, dynamic and demanding. What he left behind him in New York constitutes a monument to him over a period of several decades. I was closely tied in with the Parks Department, which he directed. First, it was with respect to personnel; I think probably the most interesting of my meetings with Moses was caused by the fact that we had to hire qualified supervisory personnel to get other people to work. We had to have a fair degree of skill and leadership at the top. The first thing Moses did was to want to put most of his old people back to work. I might say also that the politicians weren't averse to firing their own people, and this included La Guardia and his own staff in City Hall, and then putting them back again on the federal payroll. This was one way to economize on the city budget and he did it. I'm sure it's been done before and since and will continue in the future.

In any event, there had apparently been a considerable number of people in the Parks Department who had been

hired off and on over the years or maybe fired recently in hopes of putting them back. So Moses came down with his chief engineer, Earl Andrews, a really gung-ho engineer, a tough construction engineer and a driver, a great guy and a capable man, but he wanted everything his own way and exactly when he wanted it. There are some times, however, when things have to be looked at from both sides. They presented me early in the game with a book in which they had the records and the requested salaries on some 700 men to provide the supervisory force for their people. Remember that the Parks Department during their peak worked up to probably 65,000 or 70,000 men, so this was not too unreasonable in numbers, but what they wanted was a blanket to hire these men at the recommended salaries. In a political atmosphere this can lead to a lot of shuffling around, you know, where men of lesser competence can be getting higher salaries and things of this sort. We were checking into their background with the Civil Service Commission of New York City and independently. I had put a small group to check records, particularly with the city government and the Civil Service Commission (local Civil Service Commission). I hadn't yet satisfied Moses and they used to call back each day from the day they had given me the list, "Did you approve it? Has it been put on Mr. Johnson's desk? Did you okay it today?" I quess four or five days went by and Moses was champing at the bit and Andrews was needling him to get the men, so Moses called up Johnson and was giving Johnson hell. Really he was giving me hell, telling him I was just holding up the wheels of progress. The general called me in one morning and said, "Moses tells me that you are holding up his list of supervisors and he can't get any work done or get organized until you do." "Well," I said, "I certainly don't want to hold them up. I've only had them for about four or five days, and I'll get them back to him in another couple." Moses said, "Well, I gave you a list with the names of the men and their salaries and that's all you need. Why didn't you approve it." "Well," I said, "I guess maybe I should have but in the meantime I've found that 12 of them, at least, are dead. This is one of the reasons why I haven't approved it." Well, this stunned him. I don't recall that there were any more, and within the week we approved it. This is typical of leaders who want to get things done, and it is probably more typical in the political field than in others; they try to stampede you, but I wasn't about to be stampeded by Moses or anybody else.

Anna Rosenburg was Assistant Administrator for the labor side of affairs. She had with her a confidant of General Johnson's and of the Roosevelt administration named Dan Ring, and their interests were to see that the interests of labor and organized labor be protected. You may recall that under the Roosevelt administration, and right in the midst of this, the CIO was born. We had people there like Joe Ryan of the Longshoreman's Union. There were representatives of the AFL side of it, too; George Meany was a name that was getting well known, and there were a considerable number of others. With Anna Rosenburg also was Jim Mitchell, who later became the Director of Civilian Personnel on the Somervell staff in the Pentagon during the war. We ran into the usual featherbedding where labor tried to get control of everything. I remember that at Fort Schuyler, for instance, we used a lot of air -- compressed air -- for jackhammers and whatnot, cutting through those massive walls to rebuild it as the New York Merchant Marine Academy. New air compressors were somewhat limited, I guess; but anyhow, we were using so much equipment that we had as many as seven air compressors hooked up in tandem in order to get the amount of air we needed, and yet each unit -- I can't tell you how many -- but each one of those small air compressors had between 8 and 11 men assigned to it, despite the fact that they were all hooked up together. Hell, they had an engine man, they had an oiler, they had 2 guys for three shifts each, and 2 more doing this or that. It was absolutely ridiculous. You could go up and watch this battery of air compressors and you could see maybe 50 or 60 men standing around there at a time when, as long as the air was coming out and the valves were working all right, there was damn little to do except refuel and check each shift. But these were the days when the CIO was born. I can't speak of the relative values of either one organization or the other. I merely point out that this was the beginning of the AFL-CIO struggle.

My work in the WPA and my closeness to the political and civilian scene paid great professional dividends. This was really my first exposure to organization in a big way, and this was big. To put projects together for 225,000 men, or even part of it when I had one of the divisions . . . 75,000 men was a good-size task for a young captain. We had a lot of authority and lots of responsibility. It was fascinating because of the way the political, the

economic, and the social problems across the board were all so interlocked. It was tremendously educational.

I want to mention briefly the other federal organization, the Public Works Administration, the PWA. I mentioned that the Works Progress Administration was set up on the basis of 70% for labor and 30% for other costs, meaning largely materials and equipment. The PWA, Public Works Administration, on the other hand, was supposed to be the hard-nose and efficient side of the construction business where it was recognized that 70% of the cost of a project usually goes into materials and equipment and 30% into labor. Consequently, if you tried to do a first-class construction job under the WPA, you had to pad your labor. This is what they tried to do. I don't want to be critical, because we have the parks and the beautiful swimming pools still available today, but when they wanted to build a first-class structure in a park, they figured out first the cost of materials and equipment, said this is 30% of the project cost, and added the rest in labor. So, the cost was worked out backwards, you see. This is why so many people were raking leaves in the parks. As they used to say, if it was a mowing job, "There's two comin', two goin', two sittin', two mowin'." In other words, about eight people doing about a one-man job. Why? Because enough money had to be justified to buy the concrete to build the swimming pools, the pumps, and all the rest of it. If you could get a project under Public Works Administration, which provided for ample materials and equipment, then you put in only for the needed labor.

Despite some administration comments, I think I'd rather have such programs than pay able-bodied men to do nothing except get in trouble or increase their frustration by sitting around beer parlors. There's plenty to do in this country. We need to clean the country up. I don't say that every man can use a pick and shovel; I couldn't anymore. I respect the fact that other people can't. But I think there are ways to do this, particularly when we've turned back to the labor market a million who had been in uniform at a time (1971) when men are still being laid off in industry. We'd better find something for all these people to do . . . or the physically fit of them, at least.

Q: I'd like to talk about the third administration when Victor Ridder was replaced by General Somervell, then a lieutenant colonel. I know that as your career unfolds you spend some years under the influence of General Somervell. What are your recollections of the general at this time?

A: When I came into the Army, he was a young officer, a major with 10 years of service in 1924. He had been sent over to Turkey in connection with the rebuilding of the Turkish railroad system as a very young officer. He was a man who I thought was marked from the start for great success. He did end up as a four-star general commanding the Army Service Forces during the war. I can think of very few others who could have done that job as well. He was a great organizer. He had a tremendous personality. He had a great sense of political values, and without saying anything derogatory about him at all, he used them to the utmost. He knew the men in politics, and they knew him, and they admired him. He always turned in a good job wherever he went.

Somervell was sent up to Harry Hopkins. Let me back up just a second. Somervell was sent down to start the building of the cross-Florida Canal in 1935. (It's been started and stopped two or three times.) He had seen me somewhere in the summer of 1935, said he was going to build an across-Florida canal and would like to have me along. I think he regarded me as one of the better young officers. When that folded up, Harry Hopkins got him up to Washington. He knew Hopkins, and Hopkins sent him up to New York when Victor Ridder was up there -- in about December 1935 -- to resurvey and reorganize the WPA in New York City. Ridder had made some modifications, but I guess Hopkins thought that more was needed to clean up loose ends left by the Johnson administration. So, when Colonel Somervell came up I saw him several times and he made a number of changes. To put it one way without attempting to get into detail, if you consider it was a vertical administration and that the subordinate elements were organized vertically, he changed it so that they were organized horizontally. He made these changes, put them into effect, and then he went back to Washington as an assistant to Hopkins. I don't know if he had a roving commission or what he did. This was in December 1935, and by June of 1936 we were informed that Somervell was coming up to take over in New York City. We wondered what that would mean. At that time, I was made

Special Assistant to the Administrator, as Mr. Ridder was coming under considerable attack for not getting the WPA bills paid in order to save the discounts to the government, which were substantial. I quess it wouldn't sound like much today, but what we're talking about then was about $20 million of unpaid bills that were in clerk's bottom drawers or various places. Sometimes I think they were just put there for questionable reasons. If vendors wanted prompt payment they had to talk to the desk concerned, and whether this involved a gift of a bottle of whiskey or something, I wouldn't know. I wouldn't make any general accusation. On the other hand, there may have been people who would rather not take the discount but get the full amount for what they sold, and they could easily tell someone, "Don't push my papers through for payments."

Anyhow, there were $20 million in back payments and it was beginning to be an embarrassing situation when they put me into the picture. It was a delicate situation because the payments were being paid by the Treasury Department, not the WPA. We turned all bills approved for payment to the Treasury Department, and they were supposed to handle it. The man heading the Treasury Department was a fine man. He lives in Massachusetts. We still exchange Christmas cards and have maintained a warm friendship despite the fact that I was in the difficult position of having to check into the operations at his office.

When we got the job done, I was given the job of moving the WPA from the Port Authority building at 8th Avenue and 14th Street up to the Cadillac-Uppercu Building, which was the old Cadillac main sales outlet near Columbus Circle. This was quite a job, involving 3,000 people, but we did it over one weekend. When people came in the following Monday morning, they each knew exactly where their desk was, which elevator to go to, and they had the same telephone extensions they had had on Friday night when they left the old office. In those days this was quite an accomplishment. Much greater things have been done since, but to me as a young officer at the time, it was a very intriguing thing to move 3,000 people and have them all at the right desk with their own equipment and their old extension numbers on Monday morning. It was very satisfying.

Colonel Somervell used to talk with me a lot when he came up, and we had some enjoyable dinners and

evenings together. My wife was down at the Jersey shore at the time. We were always good friends. He was a gourmet of sorts. We had a fine dinner and did a lot of talking. An interesting point here is that he talked about organization again. And I said, "Well, we just reorganized." He said, "How did you like it?" "Well," I said, "Frankly, I didn't like it too much as I mentioned at the time." "Well," he said, "Don't worry; you'll find one thing when you have a job like this to do: the best way to handle it is to get some degree of reorganization." So he proceeded to organize it back more closely to what it was initially, before he had reorganized it six months before. It was one of his principles, and it left you with no doubt as to who in the hell was running the show.

Q: I'm not sure how this comes in, but there was an individual who wrote a letter to the Secretary of War, requesting that you stay on as Administrator.

A: Yes, that happened and it got to be an embarrassment. The people in New York, particularly on the political side . . . I don't know that they were particularly feeling that I had done any exceptional job, and I don't think that I had participated in any machinations that were to give them any comfort, but they didn't know Somervell; they did know me. So they came to me and said, "We think that you're the man who ought to stay here and run the show," and I said, "Well, this is not in the cards. I'm just a youngster, I don't have any tie-in with Hopkins." As a matter of fact, they had checked already and found out that I voted for Hoover in 1932, so I wasn't expecting anything from this administration. They said, "Well, frankly, you are doing a good job and the main reason we want you is because we have confidence that you can do a job, and we'd rather have somebody that we know and have observed, than to have somebody coming in cold that we don't know." So that's about what happened there. None of this was my instigation, and it caused me some embarrassment because the Chief of Engineers wrote me, under the assumption that I was trying to perpetuate myself in New York. Actually, he had told me before that I couldn't even go to the Command and Staff College at Leavenworth until I got into River and Harbor work, so I wasn't particularly anxious to stay on this particular job and soon went to the Seattle Engineer District.

I gained great experience and insight here that proved invaluable throughout my career and later life. Evaluating the leadership characteristics of principal men I served under -- General Hugh Johnson, Victor Ridder, and then later General Somervell -- has been fascinating. We also had many amusing incidents, particularly with a fellow as fiery as little La Guardia, the mayor, who was a fascinating man because of his dedication to improving the lot of his people. There was no doubt in my mind about that, and I think that he was probably as honest as a man in his position can be. This is not saying that the people under him didn't stray from the line, but he was quite a remarkable man in many ways; anyway, we had a lot of amusing incidents with him as we went along. It was always quite a pleasure to take a trip with him. He would explode, of course. His secretary in those days was Clendenin Ryan, and he fired him about once a week and then would wonder why he wasn't there when he called him next. I remember one time when he told Clen to get out and never appear again, and Ryan went back to his office and about three minutes later La Guardia started jumping on the bell to call him in. He heard it ringing -- as a matter of fact I did, too, as I happened to be there with him -- but he didn't do anything. So La Guardia stuck his head out of the door, and he said, "Goddammit, Ryan, why don't you come in here? Don't you hear me ringing for you?" Ryan said, "Yes, I heard you, Mr. Mayor, but you just fired me and I'm cleaning out my desk," and he said, "Well, Goddammit, get in here or I'll fire you again." That's the kind of man he was.

I remember once we went over to an orphanage, over in Queens, and the Borough President of Queens was a fellow by the name of George Harvey, who had been a tank commander in World War I, and George was a pretty tough guy. He was a Republican, believe it or not, and not a supporter of La Guardia. It's hard for me to think that a New York borough could be governed by a Republican; but, anyhow, we went to Queens with General Johnson, La Guardia, and whoever was heading the Department of Education. It was a Catholic orphanage, and we were met at the bottom of some steps by the nuns and a bunch of children. As you might expect, there were a few negro children in the group, and there was one little negro boy who was right down in front. He wasn't in the front row, but he was in about the second or third row, and he stood out among the other children because he was black. He was about maybe six or seven years old. La Guardia was there

with his black hat on, George Harvey was near him; General Johnson and the rest of us were sort of taking an overview of the situation. The Mayor started speaking to the children and asking them questions, and finally he shakes hands with the little negro boy and says, "What's your name, my little man?" The little fellow said, sort of pouting, "Well, it's Fiorello, but I'm not very proud of it." And so La Guardia, instead of saying anything to the little fellow at all, turns around to George Harvey, and said, "God damn you, George, I'll get you for this," right in front of all of the kids, but that was typical of him.

We ran into lots of offers, of course, where there were cuts that could have been taken on the side. To those of us in the military, I don't think that there was any great temptation. The opportunities were certainly there, but we did our best to keep it honest, straight, and level.